40. Words that Wound

Sticks and stones can break my bones, and words can also hurt me!

Themes	Discrimination, Gender equality, Violence
Level of complexity	Level 2
Age	10 – 13 years
Duration	60 minutes
Group size	5-20 children
Type of activity	List making, prioritizing, discussion
Overview	Children give examples of hurtful language and analyze its motives and effects.
Objectives	• To reflect on the causes and effects of hurtful language
	• To understand how people may respond differently to different terms
	• To understand the limits of freedom of expression
	• To practise skills for opposing hurtful language
Preparation	Copy CRC Article 13 on chart paper or the blackboard.
Materials	• Post-its or slips of paper and sticky tape
	• Chart paper and a marker, or blackboard and chalk
	• Copy of CRC Article 13

Instructions

1. Write out and/or read CRC Article 13 aloud. Point out that this article of the CRC gives a child the right to freedom of expression but specifically restricts expression that violates the rights and reputations of others. Discuss freedom of expression by asking questions such as these:

    a. Should we always be able to say whatever we like?

    b. Should limits be placed on what we can say about our thoughts and beliefs?

    c. What kind of language would violate the rights of others?

    d. What kind of language would violate the reputation of others?

2. Explain that this activity will explore some of these questions.

3. Give everyone slips of paper and ask them to write down hurtful comments they hear people say about other children or names that children call each other, each one on a separate slip of paper.

4. Make a scale on the wall such as the one below, ranging from 'Teasing / Playful' to 'Extremely Painful / Degrading'. Ask the children to put their words where they think they belong on the scale. Encourage them not to talk during this part of the activity.

Teasing / Playful / Not painful	A Little Painful / Degrading	Moderately Painful / Degrading	Very Painful / Degrading	Extremely Painful / Degrading

5. Then ask everyone to examine the wall silently. Usually the same words will appear several times and are almost always rated at different degrees of severity.

Debriefing and Evaluation

1. When the children are sitting down again, ask them what they observed, guiding their analysis with questions such as these:

   a. Did some words appear in more than one column?

   b. Why do you think some people thought a word was not hurtful and others though it was painful or degrading?

   c. Does it matter how a word is said? Or by whom?

   d. Why do people use words such as these?

   e. Is hurting others by using words a form of violence? Why?

2. Ask the children if they can see any patterns or categories among these hurtful words. As the children begin to identify and mention these categories (e.g. about physical appearances and abilities, mental characteristics, sexuality, family or ethnic background), write down the categories on the board. Guide their analysis with questions such as these:

   a. Are some words only for girls? For boys?

   b. Why do you think hurtful language falls into these topics?

   c. In what topics or categories do the words considered most hurtful seem to be?

   d. What conclusions can you draw about hurtful language from these categories?

3. Ask the children to remove their slips of paper from the first chart and place them under the topic or category where they best fit. You may want to have one category labelled 'Other'. When the children are re-seated, ask questions such as these:

   a. What categories seem to have the greatest number of slips? How can you explain that?

   b. Do the words considered most hurtful seem to fall into particular categories?

   c. Don't answer aloud but consider: do the words you use yourself fall into a particular category?

   d. Divide the class into small groups and give each group several of the slips containing the words considered most painful. Ask someone in each group to read the first word or phrase. The group should accept that this is a hurtful comment and discuss 1) whether people should be allowed to say such things, and 2) what to do when it happens. Repeat the process for each word or phrase.

4. Ask the children to report back on their conclusions in Step 3. Relate hurtful speech to human rights responsibilities by asking questions such as these:

   a. Do adults have a responsibility to stop hurtful speech? If so, why?

   b. Do children have a responsibility to stop it in their own lives? If so, why?

   c. What can you do in your community to stop hurtful speech?

   d. Why is it important to do so?

   e. In what way is hurtful speech a violation of someone's human rights?

Suggestions for follow-up

- Further the discussion about what children can do to stop hurtful language. Role-play name-calling situations and let children experiment together with ways to respond.

- The activity 'FROM BYSTANDER TO HELPER', p. 108, helps children consider what they can do individually to intervene in hurtful behaviours.

Ideas for action

- Use this activity to discuss how the children use language within this group. Are there some words that the group agrees should not be used?
- If your group has already developed group rules, consider adding a clause regarding hurtful language.

Tips for the facilitator

- This activity requires sensitive judgment on the part of the facilitator. Although children know 'bad words' from an early age, they seldom discuss them with adults. Steps 2-4 are likely to evoke embarrassment and nervous laughter. The children may need your reassurance that in this context it is acceptable to bring these words out in public. You are not 'using' them but discussing them.
- It is a good ideas not to say the words aloud but keep them unspoken, in written form only, except in the debriefing Step 3, where children are determining whether a word is acceptable or not.
- A central learning point of this activity is that the same words can have very different feelings, i.e. a word that one child may consider playful another will feel to be very hurtful. Do not let the discussion undermine the feelings of a sensitive child because others think a word is innocuous. You may want to spend more time exploring the factors that could sensitize someone to certain words.
- This activity is not recommended for groups of a wide age range. Be aware that some children will not know the meaning of some words, especially those related to sexuality. Young children may not understand that some words relate to sexual behaviour. Adapt this exercise carefully for your specific group.
- The debriefing is essential for this activity. Give the children plenty of time to make their own categories and draw their own conclusions, otherwise the link to human rights will be tenuous at best.

Adaptation for younger children

- This activity can be effectively modified for younger children (e. g. 8 – 10 years old or even younger) by omitting Instruction 1 and using only Debriefing Question 1. Conclude by reflecting with the group on how to prevent using words that hurt people.

Adaptations

For older children: You may wish to run the activity on separate days. Perhaps doing the activity and Debriefing Step 1 and 2 on the first day, and Debriefing Steps 3 and 4 on a subsequent day in order to allow the children time to assimilate what they have learnt and begin to make more informed observations of the world around them.

For younger children: Debriefing Step 1 may be enough. Follow up with role-playing ways to respond to hurtful language.